

ANALYSIS

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1923)



Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

“The work is comprised of 13 brief but suggestive imagistic statements, in each of which a blackbird is the point of reference. Although the blackbird is central to the context of each verse, the bird does not possess a constant symbolic meaning. It is considered in more general philosophic terms that relate the 13 views to issues concerning reality and the imagination, but these are not presented in an orderly or sequential relationship.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“As with many Stevens poems, ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’ is a representation of the ways in which the imagination may impose order on reality. The poem gives thirteen permutations of the poet’s perspective, through a variety of patterns (blackbird static, blackbird moving; blackbird real, blackbird imagined, etc.), but the list is not meant to be exhaustive—‘When the blackbird flew out of sight, / It marked the edge / Of one of many circles.’ Each man is the center of his own circle of vision and reality. In stanza VII, the ‘thin men of Haddam’ (a town in Connecticut) are starving themselves by contemplating the imagined ‘golden birds’ instead of feasting on the reality at hand—the blackbird walking at the feet of the town’s women.

Peter L. McNamara (in *College English*, March 1964) has written: ‘Stevens’ work reflects an alternative dilating and narrowing of poetic vision... Whichever view of reality may concern him in any given poem, the vision grows out of the poet’s acute awareness of the constant mutations in the external world. It is this awareness of change, of the myriad facets of existential reality, which Stevens intends to

convey through his poetry. The need for man to be attentive to each element of reality is the message of a poem such as 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 980

"We are told that there are, after all, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird; all these ways are perhaps dominated by this one: 'A man and a woman / Are one. / A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one.' The truth about the imagination is that it can again and again bring about unity in the world."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 383

"There are, when the problem is considered in purely intellectual terms, not just 'thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird' but probably an infinite number, depending on an unknown and perhaps unknowable number of factors, including the particular spot in space and time from which the uninvolved consciousness looks. If one *likes* blackbirds, on the other hand, or feels any sort of 'interpenetration of being' with whatever contains any evidence of being, then the number of ways of looking is considerably reduced."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 437

Michael Hollister (2015)